

A VISIT TO THE BIRTH-PLACE OF BURNS.

BY GRACE GREENWOOD.

Dear M——: I left Belfast on the evening of the 23d of September, with my friends, Mr. and Miss N——, for a short tour in Scotland. We landed at Ardrossan, a port of no particular note, and from thence took the railway to Ayr. This last is a fine, flourishing town, but aside from the "*two brigs*," containing no objects of peculiar interest as associated with Burns. Here we took a droskey, and drove over to the old parish of Alloway. I cannot tell you how sadly I missed you from my side, my dear M——, when approaching, with the true spirit of a pilgrim, the birth-place of that noble poet of Love and Nature, whose sweetest songs I had learned from your lips, almost with my cradle-hymns. As I gazed around on the scenes once dear and familiar to his eyes, my heart, if not all a-glow with its earliest poetic enthusiasm, acknowledged a deep sympathy for, and did honor to, him who, while his soul was lifted into the divine air of poesy, withdrew not his heart from his fellows—who shared humbly in their humble fortunes, and felt intensely their simple joys and bitter sorrows

—who, with all his faults, was honest and manly; with all his wants and poverty, proud and free, and nobly independent—who, amid all his follies and errors, acknowledged God and revered purity.

The cottage in which Burns was born, and which his father built, was originally what is here called a "clay bigging," consisting only of two small apartments on the ground floor—a kitchen and sitting-room. The kitchen has a recess for a bed, and here the poet first opened his bewildered baby eyes on a most ungenial world. This room, it is supposed, was the scene of "The Cotter's Saturday Night." I was somewhat disappointed to find this cottage standing on the road, and that it had been built on to, and white-washed out of all character and venerableness. It is now occupied as an ale-house, which besemeth it little as the scene of the beautiful religious poem above named. A few rods from the door stands the "auld haunted kirk," through one of whose windows luckless Tam O'Shanter took his daring observation of Old Nick and the witches, "as they appeared when enjoying themselves." This is a picturesque, roofless, rafterless edifice, in a good state of preservation. In the pleasant old church-yard rests the father of the poet, beneath the tombstone erected and inscribed by one whose days should have been "long in the land" according to the promise, for Burns truly honored his father and his mother.

From the kirk we went to the monument, which stands on the summit of the eastern bank of the Doon, and near to the "auld brig," on the "key-stone" of which poor Tam O'Shanter was delivered from his weird pursuers, and his gray mare "Meggie" met with a loss irreparable. This monument, of which the prints give you a very good idea, is of graceful proportions and a graceful style of architecture. The grounds about it, though small in extent, are admirably kept, shaded with fine shrubbery, and made more beautiful by hosts of rare and lovely flowers. There seemed to me something peculiarly and touchingly fitting in thus surrounding an edifice, sacred to the genius of Burns, with the leafy haunts of the birds he loved, in whose songs alone would his tuneful memory live, and with the sweetness and brightness of flowers, from whose glowing hearts he would have drawn deep meanings of love and pure breathings of passion, or on whose frail, fragrant leaves he would have read holy Sabbath truths, lessons of modesty and meekness, and teachings of the wondrous wisdom of Him who planted the daisy on the lonely hill-side, and the poet in a weary world—the one to delight the eyes, the other to charm and cheer the souls, of his creatures.

Within the monument, we saw that most touching relic of Burns, the Bible which he gave to "Highland Mary" at their solemn betrothal. It is in two volumes. On the fly-leaf of the first, in the handwriting of the poet, is the text, "And ye shall not swear by my name falsely: I am the Lord." In the second, "Thou shalt not forswear thyself, but shalt perform unto the Lord thine oaths." In both volumes is the name of Burns, with his Mason's mark, and in one is a lock of Mary's own beautiful golden hair—a soft,

glossy curl, which in that last tender parting may have been smoothed down by the caressing hand, may have waved in the breath, or lain against the breast of the poet-lover.

The view from the summit of the monument is exceedingly beautiful and interesting, embracing, as it does, many of the scenes of the life and song of Burns. The scenery of air is not grand, surely, nor strikingly picturesque; but this view is lovely, quiet and pleasant, beyond description—truly, a *smiling* landscape. Perhaps something was owing to the rich sunshine and soft air of the day, and more to the wondrous charm of association; but I never remember to have felt a more exquisite sense of beauty, a delight more deep and delicious, though shadowed with sad and regretful memories, than while sitting or strolling on the lovely banks of the Doon, half cheated by excited fancy with the hope that I might see the rustic poet leaning over the picturesque "auld brig," following with his great, dark, dreamy eyes, the windings of the stream below, or, with glowing face upraised, revelling in the clear deep blue, and fair floating clouds above; or, perchance, walking slowly on the shore, coming down from the pleasant "Braes o' Ballochmyle," musing, with folded arms and drooping head, on "the bonnie lass" who had there unconsciously strayed across the path of a poet, and chanced upon immortality. The Doon seemed to roll by with the melodious flow of his song—now with the impetuous sweep of passion; now with the fine sparkle of pleasant wit; now, under the solemn shadows of sorrow; now out into the clear sunlight of exultant joy; now with the soft gurgle and silver trickling of love's light measures; now with the low, deep murmur of devotion. As I lingered there, countless snatches of the poet's songs, and stanza after stanza of long-forgotten poems, sprang to my lips; rare thoughts, the sweet, fresh flowers of his genius, seemed suddenly to blossom out from all the hidden nooks and still shaded places of memory, and the fair children of his fancy, who had sung themselves to sleep in my heart long ago, stirred, awoke, and smiled into my face again.

Happily for me, my companions fully understood and sympathized with my mood;—so little was said, that much might be felt. One sung—

"Ye banks and braes o' bonnie Doon;"

and whether it was that his voice, in its deep, pathetic tones, was peculiarly suited to the mournful words and air, or that the scene itself mingled its melodious memory with the singing, I know not; but never before had I been so affected by the song.

On our way back to Ayr, we called to see the sister and nieces of Burns—Mrs. Beggs and her daughters—who we had been assured were most kindly accessible to visitors. This visit was altogether the most interesting and gratifying event of the day. Mrs. Beggs lives in a simple but charming little rose-embowered cottage, about a mile from her birth-place, where all who seek her with respectful interest, receive a courteous and cordial welcome. Mrs. Beggs is now about eighty years of age, but looks scarcely above sixty, and shows more than the remains of remarkable beauty. Her smile could hardly have

been sweeter; or her eyes finer, at twenty. Her sight, hearing, and memory, seem unimpaired; her manners are graceful, modest, and lady-like, and she converses with rare intelligence and animation, speaking with a slight, sweet Scottish accent. Her likeness to Naysmith's portrait of her brother is very marked—her eyes are peculiarly like the idea we have of his, both by pictures and description—large, dark, lustrous, and changing. Those eyes shone with new brightness as I told her of our love for the memory of her beloved brother, our sympathy in his sorrows, and our honor for his free and manly spirit—when I told her that the New World, as the Old, bowed to the mastery of his genius, and were swayed to smiles or tears by the wondrous witchery of his song. But when I spoke my admiration of the monument, and said, "What a joy it would have been to him, could he have foreseen such noble recognitions of his greatness!" she smiled mournfully, and shook her head, saying, "Ah, madam, in his proudest moments, my poor brother never dreamed of such a thing;" then added that his death-chamber was darkened, and his death agony deepened by want and care, and torturing fears for the dear ones he was to leave. I was reminded by her words of the expression of an old Scotch dame, in our country, on hearing of the completion of this monument: "Puir Rob! he asked for bread, and now they gie him a stane."

Mrs. Beggs says that Naysmith's portrait of her brother is the best, but that no picture could have done full justice to the kindling and varying expression of his face. In her daughters, who are pleasant and interesting women, you can trace a strong family resemblance to the poet. The three sons of Burns are yet living—two in the army, and one has a situation under Government at Dumfries. All three are widowers. When I saw her, Mrs. Beggs was expecting daily the two youngest, the soldiers, who as often as possible visit Ayr, and cherish as tenderly, as proudly, the memory of their father.

It was with deep emotion that I parted from this gentle and large-hearted woman, in whose kindred and likeness to the glorious peasant I almost felt that I had seen *him*, heard his voice with all its searching sweetness, and had my soul sounded by the deep divinings of his eyes. It seems, indeed, a blessed thing, that after the sorrow which darkened her youth, the beholding the pride of her house sink into the grave in his prime, broken-hearted by the neglect of friends, the contempt and cruelty of foes, by care and poverty, and bitterest of all, by a weary weight of self-reproach—that she has lived to see his children happy and prosperous—his birth-place, and his grave counted among the world's pilgrim shrines—to be herself honored and beloved for his sake, and to sun her chilled age in the noontide of his glory.—*National Era.*